Appleby Archaeology Group

Mr Jamie Quatermain from Lancaster University Archaeology Unit gave an interesting and informative talk on Prehistoric Upland Landscapes in the Lake District to the last meeting of the season of the Appleby Archaeology Group

He began by saying that 30-40 square kilometres of the Lake District have been surveyed and that this represents a small proportion of the area that could be explored. Areas rich in evidence of a prehistoric landscapes include the coast, the south west fells, Askam Fell, Caldbeck Fell, Shap and Haweswater. Between the The Eden Valley and the M6 there is evidence of movement to the uplands such as at Crosby Ravensworth and around Kirby Stephen.

The survey work is now done by walking across the land using satellite positi (GPS) to precisely locate monuments. Pollen analysis is a critical component of the survey work and provides information about vegetation and clues to the climate. Peat bogs and damp ground traps pollen and soil cores can be taken for pollen analysis. From the information archaeologists can identify the vegetation of the past going back to the last ice age. The nature of the vegetation also indicates the prevailing climate. 6000 years ago the climate was very poor but by 3000 years ago it was warmer and drier than to-day It then slowly deteriorated throughout the Bronze Age with a rapid decline to colder wetter conditions in the Iron Age.

Neolithic sites (3500-2000BC) ago are predominantly found on the coastline where land is good though many sites have been destroyed by subsequent human activity. Ehenside Tarn, drained in the 1950s revealed stone and wooden implements and at Bootle there is evidence of 4 henge monuments.

The significance of the Neolithic is that with the start of farming there was an explosion of technology after a 100,000 years when there had been very little change. Man began to take control of his environment, settlements developed, populations increased and there was time to develop artistic skills and produce monuments such as Castlerigg Circle. As the population increased demand for land grew and man moved to the marginal uplands.

The sequence of land use on the uplands appears to have been virgin forest, primary cairn fields and pasture, protofield systems, cairn field systems with mixed farming and lastly cultivated field system. Primary cairn fields started with land clearance and the depositing of unwanted stone to form many small cairns and pasture. It was suggested that each cairn may be the site of an ancient tree. There is no evidence of huts at this time. Prototype field systems appear with the evidence of some organisation of the land into fields for pasture, and hut circles appear. Cairn field systems are indicated by a more complex settlement with cultivated fields and pasture. Cairns are found in lines suggesting boundaries. In the last stage the fields are all

cultivated, the settlements are complex with houses, stock enclosures and funerary monuments.

Mr Quatermain explained that establishing the chronology is difficult as there are few artefacts. Some relationships can be deduced from funerary material, and these indicate that cairn fields and are Bronze Age (2000-600BC).

Iron age settlements are distinctive as they were enclosed with no associated field systems suggesting livestock herds were managed by those living in the enclosure. Enclosed settlements such Shoulethwaite near Thirlemere, are rare in Cumbria where only 78 have been identified. They are more evident on the east side of the country and become large and defensive hill forts in the south.

The abandonment of the marginal land and the development of enclosed settlements suggest a time of stress and a need to defend the settlement. This decline coincides with the deterioration in the climate in the Iron Age and it is because the marginal upland land has not been cultivated since that the sites have been preserved.

Mr Quatermain concluded the evening by taking questions from the floor.

P H Rouston 8/5/2001